

Talking Points for the DDI

10 June 1986

Assad's Strategy on Terrorism

Syrian President Assad uses or supports terrorism as one of several coercive instruments to advance Syrian goals. When diplomacy fails, Assad uses assassination and intimidation to raise the cost to other states of pursuing policies inimical to Syrian interests, to keep opponents off balance, and to extract financial support.

- Damascus has used terrorist tactics to maintain its dominance in Lebanon, thwart substantive movement toward peace negotiations between moderate Arabs and Israel, exert control over the Palestinian movement, eliminate dissidents, and attack Israel.
- Among the most significant attacks involving an apparently extensive Syrian role have been assassinations of PLO officials and moderate Arab diplomats in the Middle East and Europe. [REDACTED]

25X1

Syrian involvement in terrorism has undergone a fundamental shift in recent years, as it has moved away from direct involvement in terrorist acts in favor of using surrogates that enable Damascus to avoid being directly implicated. The majority of terrorist attacks involving Syria since 1983 have been conducted by radical Palestinians.

- Syrian involvement in the attempt to bomb the El Al jet in London on 17 April is a departure from its usual methods--Damascus has tended to use violence in a fairly disciplined manner--and is the first time since the early 1970s that Syria has been directly linked to a major terrorist operation in Europe that could have resulted in enormous civilian casualties. [REDACTED]

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It is too early to assess whether the attempt on the El Al jet is a one-time, high-risk retaliatory attack--possibly for Israel's interception on 4 February of a Libyan jet carrying senior Syrian Ba'th Party officials--or if Damascus has in fact altered dramatically its guidelines for the use of terror. [REDACTED]

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25X1

The El Al attempt could well reflect Assad's evolving strategy of stepping up pressure on Israel in an effort to achieve strategic balance.

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- In Syrian eyes terrorism is a component of the psychological war against Israel; attack against Israeli interests undermine the invincible image earned by Israel as a result of its military victories over the Arabs during the last four decades and demonstrates the ability of Israel's enemies to exploit its vulnerabilities. [REDACTED]

25X1

The Syrians believe terror has worked to erode Israeli will, especially in Lebanon.

- Syrian officials may have been prepared to increase pressure on Israel through a spectacular operation like the El Al plot in the belief that they could get away with it or absorb any retaliation if the Syrian role was discovered.
- Assad probably calculated that Syria's strong air defenses, the political risks of a Syrian-Israeli war, Damascus' close ties to Moscow, and the presence of American hostages in Lebanon, insulate Syria from major direct retaliation by Israel or the US.
- An Israeli attack on terrorist training camps in Lebanon, moreover, could provide Syria with an opportunity to improve its strategic position in the southern Bekaa Valley. Assad may believe he can repeat his success of last November, when he exploited Israel's shoot down of two Syrian MIGs to deploy surface to air missiles in and near Lebanon which have effectively halted Israeli overflights in eastern Lebanon since then. [REDACTED]

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Syria's future level of involvement in terrorism against non-Arab targets almost certainly will depend on Assad's estimate of the costs of the El Al incident.

- Since the US airstrike on Libya in April, Syrian officials have been fearful that Israel or the US might launch similar attacks on Syria if Damascus is implicated in further acts of terrorism against Israeli or US targets. This concern has largely dissipated since late May.
- We have some tentative indications that Damascus may be attempting to limit the activities of terrorist groups with which it has influence, such as Abu Nidal, but this is inconclusive. [REDACTED]

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These efforts are likely to be only temporary. Damascus will not halt its use and sponsorship of terrorism as long as Syrian leaders believe they run little political or military risk. [REDACTED]

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SUBJECT: Assad's Strategy on Terrorism

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DDI/NESA/AI, [REDACTED] /10 Jun 86

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